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Gulf War Threatens U.S. Vital Interests

Male Violence, Machismo & Militarism

A Commentary
By Daniel Ellsberg

Tom Paine said wars are caused by the pride of kings. Mid-January in the Persian Gulf, two willful men chose war. Each of them—George Bush, Saddam Hussein—preferred, and still prefers, to risk and sacrifice countless thousands of lives rather than to risk his own humiliation, rather than to be seen as weak—unmanly, woman-like or as backing off from commitments he had foolishly made.

Neither George Bush nor Saddam Hussein is a plausible champion of a "new world order." Each is, in his own way, highly representative of a very old world order: five thousand years of institutionalized male violence, machismo and militarism.

Yet that this particular war could be prepared at length and launched in a democracy, with—despite earlier unease—so much assent, reveals how deeply rooted that old order is in our own society, and how far many Americans—not George Bush—are from regarding war truly as a last resort.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "We need the vision to see, in the ordeals of this generation, the opportunity to transfigure ourselves and American society." In this war—so far, popular, chosen by an

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elected leader, Congressionally authorized—we are forced to see ourselves and American society as in a mirror. And what we see needs profound transfiguration.

The majority support for the war reflects in part, no doubt, the early, lingering illusion that it will be short and cheap in human lives; and in part, an illogical but very old reflex that to support the troops in their time of danger must mean to support the President and his decisions.

It could better be argued that American troops deserve more of their families and friends, deserve more of us as American citizens, than unquestioning acceptance of the very President and his policies that put those troops unnecessarily at risk.

Still, those of us who believe that to support the troops we must oppose the policy are not, at this moment, well understood or popular. We are in a small minority, and polls show that many people are angry with us.

We could dodge much of that anger in the way many politicians in Congress are doing just now, the ones—nearly half of Congress—who just weeks ago were agreeing with many of us that Saddam Hussein's aggression needed to be confronted by economic sanctions and military containment but that war was not the answer. Just weeks ago they voted against war; but since the war started, four days later, nearly all of them have been very quiet or have come out for "victory."

Like them, we could keep our heads down and stay silent for the moment, until a tide of body bags drifting home from a U.S. ground offensive shifts majority public opinion in our direction.

But that would mean to let our silence be counted as assent. It would be to give up all effort, and all hope, to avert those casualties on both sides.

There is a time when silence is a lie. When silence is complicity. When silence is betrayal.

We owe it to our troops and other potential victims of this war, we owe it to our country and to ourselves, to speak the truth—the truth about ourselves, what we believe, what we know in our hearts, what we reject and what we want.

The truth—for me—is it not for you?—is that it was wrong to start a U.S. offensive war, and it is wrong to continue it; and we want, we demand, that it be ended, now, before a ground war and other escalations take the lives of ten thousand American and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi human beings.

A U.S. ground offensive is certain not only to cause massive military casualties on both sides but to evoke Iraqi gas attacks on US troops—and possibly on Israel—which would in turn lead to the removal of all restraints on air attacks that now limit damage to Iraqi civilians. Indeed, there would be unprecedented public pressure for the use of US tactical nuclear weapons; and if Iraq caused sizeable casualties in Israel by gas attack, Israeli nuclear retaliation would be a strong possibility.

Ground war is further likely to lead to the invasion of Iraq and a prolonged US occupation, accompanied by conflicts—drawing in US forces—throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

The truth is that the continuation and expansion of this war represents a graver danger and a greater evil than does any of the plausible diplomatic agreements that might end it.

Right now—after the wishful hopes of victory through airpower have been dispelled, and before the mistake of launching the war is compounded by the still graver errors of ground attack against Iraqi field fortifications or invasion of Iraq—may be the time when public pressure, rejecting permanently the ground war "option" and supporting the diplomatic initiatives by other negotiations, at last, to be tried.

If, at this moment, Saddam Hussein resists negotiating the terms of Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait in advance of the bloody test of ground combat that he seeks, that is no reason to give him—now or ever—the ground war that his strategy demands. A return by the coalition to economic sanctions—depriving him, among other things, of any income from oil so long as Iraqi troops remain in Kuwait—and a multilateral defensive posture in Saudi Arabia with sharply reduced US presence, would be far preferable.

Compared to the possible horrors impending with the current strategy, such a policy would be better from almost every conceivable point of view: better for world order, and for families with members in the Gulf; better for Israel's security, the future of the Army, the President's honor and chances of reelection.

Yet George Bush—like Saddam Hussein—seems possessed by the delusion that a ground war will serve his country's interests and his own, and that to turn away from it would be intolerably embarrassing. In the world, few voices with authority are raised in challenge.

Can this catastrophe still be averted? It will take a miracle. But miracles are possible; recall—it may take some ef-

fort—the events in East Europe just over a year ago.

The presence of so many people on the streets in protest (between one and two hundred thousand in Washington, January 26; with as many, on the same day, in San Francisco) gives me hope, in a dark time. I am thankful for that.

We are, yet, a minority, but we are not few, we are not isolated, our numbers are growing, and we can hope by making our voices heard to save more lives than are gathered in our largest demonstrations. Let us take strength from each other to do what can be done to end this war before it grows larger. That is our task.

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